

VOLUME XXIII, NUMBER 4, FALL 2023

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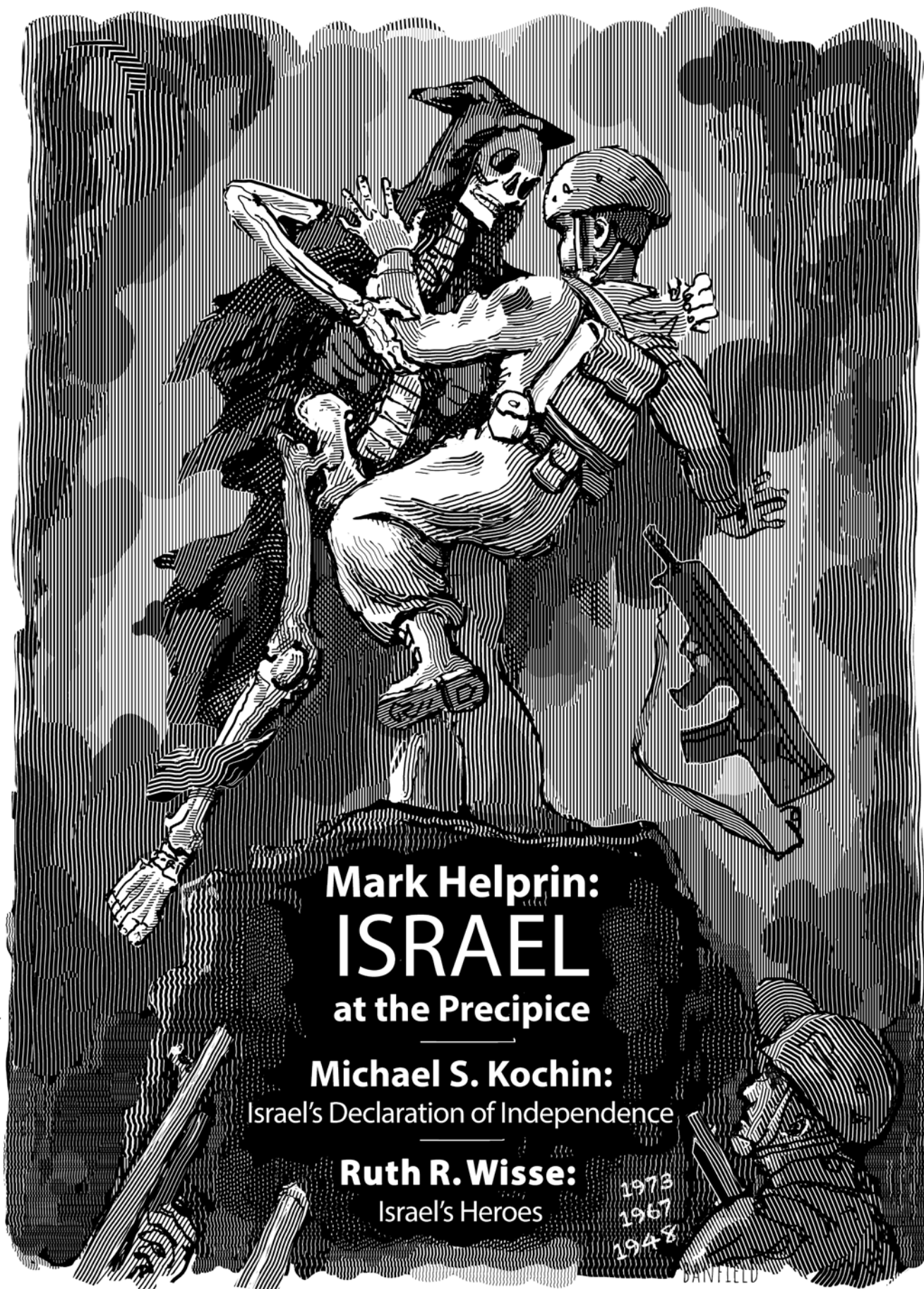
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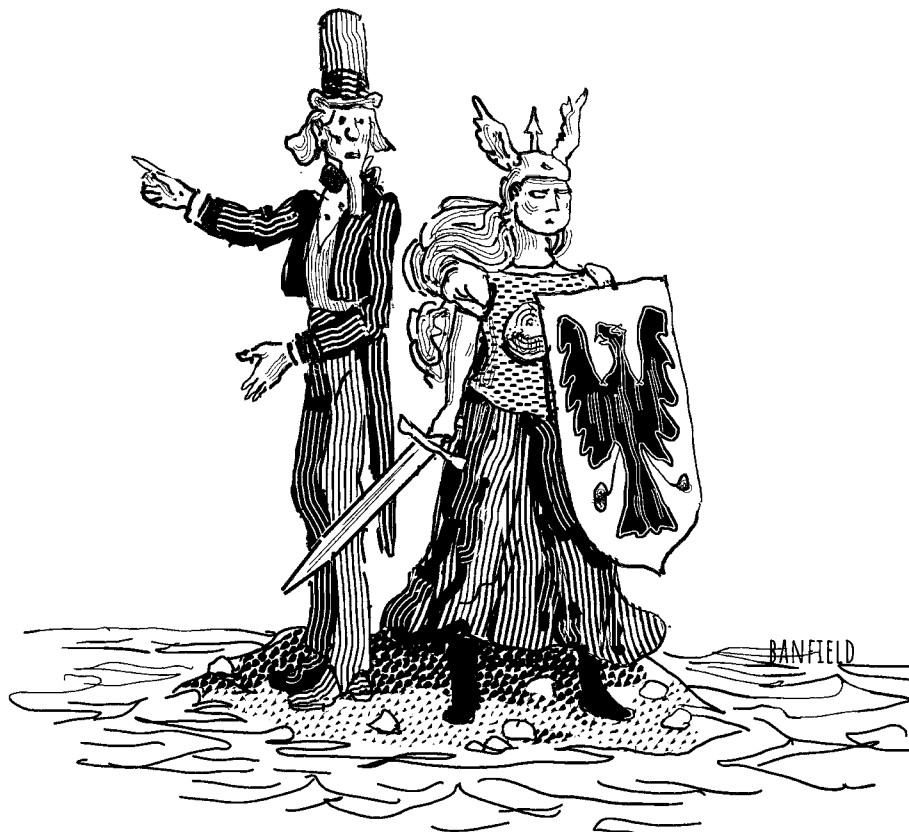
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Essay by Christopher Caldwell

# GERMANY, GROWING DESPERATE

*War, terrorism, immigration, and America.*



A LOT OF EUROPEAN GOVERNMENTS were thrown into confusion in October when Hamas's coordinated massacres and abductions sparked war between Israel and Palestinians in Gaza. Germany's ruling coalition of Social Democrats, Greens, and free marketers was not among them. In early November, economics minister Robert Habeck, a leader of the Green party, issued a ten-minute video warning over the internet to German Muslim supporters of Hamas and to various homegrown leftists and rightists. In gauging its response, their country did not enjoy the luxury of relativism. "It was my grandparents' generation," Habeck explained,

who sought to destroy Jewish life in Germany. The founding of Israel...was a promise of protection to the Jews. Germany is bound to help that this promise be kept. This is a historical foundation of our republic.

This kind of speech—grounded as it was in the country's constitutional principles rather than the speaker's sentiments and policy ambitions—is almost never given in Europe to-

day. It was superior to almost anything else said on the continent in the aftermath of the attacks. But a constitution is only as strong as the society committed to defend it, and the consensus around Germany's 1949 Basic Law, inspired by American federalism and introduced during Allied occupation in the wake of World War II, is eroding.

This erosion has a lot to do with Habeck's Greens, who, since they first shared power a quarter century ago, have been the leading proponents of a wide-open migration policy that offers an easy path to citizenship. Many of the newest Germans come from Muslim countries, which have rallied almost unanimously to Hamas's side. But the erosion in Germany's American-style constitutional culture has something to do with America, too. Especially since the start of the Ukraine war, Germany has grown less able to set policies independently of Washington. The Biden Administration's deployment of global economic institutions to discipline Russia and impoverish China has come at a high cost to Germany's prosperity and national cohesion. The government in Berlin still manages to do things, like the Habeck speech, that

command broad, cross-party admiration. More frequently, though, it is provoking impatience and even rage, and there are signs that Germany is about to grow considerably less stable.

## Willkommenskultur

WELL BEFORE THE EVENTS IN GAZA, Germany was nervous over migration. Today, 24 million of Germany's roughly 80 million people—almost 30%—are of "migrant background," and 2.7 million migrants settled in the country in 2022 alone. The demographic transformation of the West that began slowly with European decolonization and American civil rights has accelerated over the past decade and a half. Two events stand out: First, the 2011 Anglo-Franco-American invasion of Muammar Gaddafi's Libya, carried out over the strong objection of then-German chancellor Angela Merkel. Barack Obama's NATO "victory," which culminated in the killing of Gaddafi and three of his sons, has proved almost as damaging to the West as George W. Bush's Iraq defeat. It delivered the Tripolitan coast



to smuggling mafias and thus opened the prospect of residence in Europe to the entire African continent, which is projected to add a billion people before mid-century.

A second key event was the huge migration of refugees from the Syrian war in 2015. Merkel welcomed the migrants in the name of a German *Willkommenskultur*, or “culture of welcome.” By this she seemed to mean a less focused version of the postwar tolerance for others that Habeck would lay out in his early November speech about Israel. Of course, if Germany really does have the responsibilities that Habeck and Merkel describe, then its immigration policy has been reckless. The perverse effect of Merkel’s invitation was to summon others from throughout the Muslim world who had nothing to do with the Syrian wars—Pakistanis, Afghanis, Iranians. Their arrival would radicalize and divide Europe. Poland and Italy elected anti-immigrant governments. Hungary and Denmark tightened their laws on migration. Merkel opted to lead the liberal bloc in Europe, calling on the European Union to require that other countries house their “fair share” of the migrants she had welcomed.

A majority complied at the time. But over the years, all have tightened their migration policies. In early November, France’s national assembly passed an immigration law proposed by its president, Emmanuel Macron. The law is meant to address the main problem with immigration enforcement in Europe—the category of migrants who in France are called OQTFs. To explain: Angry voters have compelled governments across Europe to tighten laws on labor migration. But governments supposedly cannot tighten laws on political asylum, because those are regulated by the 1951 United Nations Convention on Refugees. This means that virtually every economic migrant picked up in a smuggler boat off the Italian coast (or in one of the rescue boats sent by progressive foundations to ply the waters nearby) claims to be a victim of political persecution seeking asylum. This gives newcomers the right to a lengthy sojourn in Europe while awaiting an asylum hearing. Nowadays most such claims are rejected, but it is expensive and bureaucratically difficult to ship the applicants back to where they came from. The denied applicant is simply dismissed with a written notice that he is required to leave French territory (*obligé de quitter le territoire français*, or OQTF). He almost never does. Macron’s bill would, among other things, end this charade by restoring the criminal offense of illegally staying in the country, a measure that 82% of French citizens back.

The Macron bill is not particularly robust. It contains a giant loophole inserted at the be-

hest of corporations—permitting the hiring of undocumented migrants for “occupations under pressure.” This may wind up undoing everything the bill achieves, much as the anti-discrimination provisions in the U.S. immigration reform of 1986 ended up promoting rather than controlling migration.

What is clear is the direction Europe wishes to go. Today Denmark, where financial support for asylum seekers is negligible and where it takes an average of 19 years for a migrant to become a citizen, gets about 2,000 asylum applications in an average year. Germany is expected to get 400,000 by the end of 2023. Denmark is the country on which virtually all European governments have announced they wish to pattern their policies. Germany is the country whose example other countries most wish to avoid.

The last two defenders of the German way gave it up at the end of September. One was Sweden, which in 2015 had been the most enthusiastic backer of Merkel’s *Willkommenskultur* and wound up taking Middle Eastern refugees in the hundreds of thousands. In the years since, the Pew Research Center has predicted that, by the year 2050, should it receive a moderate amount of immigration, Sweden will be 20% Muslim. Should it receive high immigration, it will be 30% Muslim. In late September, Prime Minister Ulf Kristersson requested the help of Sweden’s army in quelling violence in the country’s housing projects that is largely due to immigrant gangs.

The final holdout for the *Willkommenskultur* was Germany itself. In September, after 12,000 migrants landed on the tiny Italian island of Lampedusa in little more than a weekend, Chancellor Olaf Scholz insisted that Germany’s foreign minister, Habeck’s Green colleague Annalena Baerbock, drop her human-rights-related objections to expedited E.U. procedures for reviewing and rejecting asylum applicants.

The role of Angela Merkel in this transformation of the West is crucial to understand. In retrospect she was, along with Tony Blair, the great European master of the governing style practiced by all American presidents between Ronald Reagan and Donald Trump. Both George H.W. Bush and George W. Bush were conservatives confident enough in the loyalty (or gullibility) of their conservative base to govern as liberals—domestically at least. Bill Clinton, similarly, held onto lunchpail Democrats while governing on behalf of investors. Barack Obama held onto blacks while governing for billionaires. It was at best a paradox, at worst a trick: why appeal to your own people by pursuing the policy they elected you to pursue if they’ll vote for you anyway out of loyalty? Bet-

ter to pursue the policies of your adversaries and win a few of them by persuasion. In America, it worked for individual politicians, who—except for the first President Bush—were out of power by the time the public caught on. But eventually it cost the entire political class the trust of the electorate. That happened to the United States in 2016. It is happening to Germany now.

Merkel was a Christian Democrat—the daughter of an East German parson, in fact, a rare type behind the Wall. Yet she governed as a Socialist or a Green. She welcomed immigrants, passed a minimum wage, passed gay marriage (though she didn’t vote for it), and promised to end nuclear power. This meant she was leaving the entire right of the political spectrum unrepresented—an especially dangerous thing to do in Germany. If people didn’t worry as much about that as they might have, it’s because they took Merkel for a transitional figure. German nationalists were no longer so big a worry, in this complacent view, because politics would soon cease to be about nations—it would be about the climate, and international networks, and that sort of thing. The Greens would be the great beneficiaries of this new politics, the natural majority party of the generation to come.

That hasn’t happened. The Greens have become terribly unpopular, and embittered at Merkel too, whom they consider less a harbinger of tomorrow’s politics than throwback to turn-of-the-century corporate irresponsibility. There is some truth to this: Merkel governed at a time when the United States was still able to lay down the rules of the global economy, and these rules involved ruthless competition. Like her Social Democrat predecessor Gerhard Schröder, Merkel maintained Germany as an economic powerhouse by focusing on cheap inputs (especially gas from Russia and labor from Eastern Europe) and huge export markets (particularly China and the United States). Today’s Greens all but blame her for the Russian invasion of Ukraine and are the most ardent European backers of the Biden Administration’s sanctions. As the military situation has worsened for Ukraine, the political situation has worsened for the Greens.

## Ukraine

IN EARLY NOVEMBER, VALERY ZALUZHNY, the top Ukrainian military commander, told *The Economist*, “Just like in the First World War we have reached the level of technology that puts us into a stalemate. There will most likely be no deep and beautiful breakthrough.” This sounded like pessimism, and General Zaluzhny was swiftly rebuked by



Ukrainian president Volodymyr Zelensky for giving aid and comfort to the Russians. But that was surely not Zaluzhny's goal. For how was World War I resolved when it reached the point of "technological" stalemate? Through the active entry of the United States. That is what the general is aiming at.

Western enthusiasts of the Ukraine war—historian Timothy Garton Ash, for example—are on the same page. "Ukraine is running short of people ready and able to fight," Garton Ash worries in a recent *Spectator* article, concluding: "Europe must do more. That's also how we persuade the U.S. to stay the course." But surely it is the United States, which assembled and directs the Ukraine coalition from an ocean's distance away, that should need to persuade Europe to do battle against the Russian military behemoth next door. And surely it is Germany, which saw its own mighty army obliterated by its Russian neighbor in the middle of the last century, that would need to be talked into bellicosity.

Western supporters of the Ukrainian cause have a way of dressing up their own aspirations for the country as facts, and others' facts as aspirations. "Ukraine proves," the Russia analyst Leon Aron recently told *The New York Times*, "that there can be a Slavic, Orthodox country, very close to Russia ethnically—yet free, democratic and thriving, with a Western political and economic orientation and not needing a state of war with the West or to be a police state like Belarus or a military dictatorship like Russia." That "proves" really takes the cake. One can respect the heroism of the Ukrainian fighters, but "free," "democratic," and "thriving" are three adjectives that were never applied to Ukraine between the end of the Cold War and the last 18 months when the West began injecting aid that now runs into the hundreds of billions.

There has always been a significant number of Germans uncomfortable with the case for the Ukraine war. A large part of the country was in the Russian bloc during the Cold War, but the discomfort is not limited to Easterners. *The Washington Post* reported recently on the CIA's role in training Ukrainian intelligence teams that carried out dozens of assassinations behind Russian lines, including that of the daughter of pro-Kremlin philosopher Aleksandr Dugin. This fall Helmut Kohl's foreign policy adviser Horst Teltschik published a plan calling for a ceasefire.

Leaving aside more high-flown rationales, Germany has already paid a high economic price for its involvement in the Ukraine war. In early November Germany reported its highest rise in unemployment in a year. Both the

Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) and the International Monetary Fund (IMF) have predicted that Germany will finish the year having performed worse than any other advanced economy.

While other countries depended on Russia for a higher percentage of their energy, none has seen its business model so thoroughly disrupted. The boycott of Russian natural gas—reinforced by the sabotage last year of the newly completed Nord Stream II pipeline, intended to carry that gas to Germany—is only part of it. The United States has also encouraged Germany to "de-risk" its trade with China, by some measures its largest trading partner. De-risking means ceasing the export of commodities that might have military applications. But since Germany's export edge is in sophisticated machinery, this potentially strikes at the heart of the country's economic competitiveness.

This is not what Germans had bargained for. History has taught them to feel the dangers of Russia in a visceral way but not those of China—which they take for an American

### Why appeal to your own people by pursuing the policy they elected you to pursue if they'll vote for you anyway out of loyalty?

obsession. Three years ago, a poll by the Körber Foundation showed that, in the event of a "new Cold War" between the United States and China, 12% would back the United States, 3% would back China, and 82% would favor German neutrality.

The only exception to this reluctance is the Greens, who have been on a crusade against Chinese influence for most of this century, and look at sanctions against Russia as a way to pursue the so-called "energy transition." With their preference for sunshine over atomic power and internal combustion, with their hostility to automobiles and processed food, with their love of marches and protests, the Greens have often been taken for anti-American. This was always a mistake. The Greens are the most American of German parties—although their politics are those of the faculty club, not the Rotary Club. Automobile executives, by contrast, are hostile to Yankee sanctions; they fear China will slap retaliatory sanctions on German exports. The Greens propose another way of managing trade. Now that China has what looks like an insurmountable mar-

ket lead in electronic vehicles—a product for which Europe is the world's biggest market—Greens are using a regulatory strategy to keep German companies in the hunt. Much as the United States did with the Chinese telecommunications giant Huawei, the Greens argue that Chinese automobiles are a security risk. After all, a modern automobile of any kind, with its cameras and microphones and calibrators of distance, is a formidable information-gathering, even a spying, machine. Would you want a Chinese car parked on a German military base?

As long as the Greens confined their ecological agitation to the captains of industry, they had a workable political strategy. It's the same one that President Joe Biden followed with the subsidies in his Inflation Reduction Act and that the European Union followed with its NextGenerationEU COVID rescue finance plan. But the Greens are neither the wielders of the reserve currency nor the masters of the financial universe. They're more provincial and more democratic. They came up with an idea to improve the virtue of the average German homeowner. Last August, having argued that modern air-source heat pumps can warm a house with a lower carbon footprint than a plain old boiler, the Greens passed a "heating law" to mandate their purchase. Suddenly it became illegal to repair a 30-year-old boiler. You had to replace it with a "heat pump" that could set you back \$15,000-\$20,000. The coalition has scrambled to adjust the law in the weeks and months since. But that was the moment when the government's support really began to collapse.

#### Déclassement

WHEN THIS RULING COALITION FIRST came to power two years ago, it was Habeck, Baerbock, and other Green party leaders who formulated government doctrine, even though the Social Democrats held many more seats, not to mention the chancellor's office. Chancellor Scholz looked like an old man along for the ride. It is still the Greens who give the government its ideological direction, but that is turning into a bad thing in the public's eyes. In elections this fall in Bavaria (which contains Munich and a good deal of the German auto industry) and Hesse (which contains Frankfurt and most of the German financial industry), all three parties in the federal ruling coalition lost ground. Nancy Faeser, the unpopular interior minister, was the Social Democrats' lead candidate in Hesse and she barely scraped only 15% of the vote—this in a state where Social Democrats once went 40 years without losing an election.



That turns out to be a pretty accurate gauge of where the Social Democrats are nationally. A DeutschlandTrend poll in early November found that only 16% would vote for them, and only 14% for the Greens. Their free-market partners in the Free Democratic Party (FDP) would fall out of the parliament altogether. Only 23% of Germans professed themselves content with the government, versus 76% who were discontented.

What the Germans evidently wanted more of was nationalism—in the form of the Alternative for Germany, or AfD. Standing at 22% in the polls, it is now the country's second-most-popular party, with a larger place in Germans' hearts than any of the parties that make up the governing coalition. It is the very largest party in several regions of the East, including Brandenburg, Thuringia, and Saxony, where the next three German state elections will be held in fall 2024. Founded by a bunch of economists to protest the Euro, repurposed to oppose Merkel's Willkommenskultur in 2015, the AfD paints a dark picture of modern Germany's society and its future. The most hardline wing of the party, led by the Thuringian legislator Björn Höcke, appears ambivalent about the entire liberal course of postwar Germany. While he has never said that unambiguously, it must be remembered that, in the German constitutional context, to say it would be illegal. In the decade since the party was founded, three different leaders have attempted to take it in a more mainstream direction, and Höcke has survived them all.

The Christian Democrats, now run by Merkel's old rival Friedrich Merz and eager to return to more time-tested conservative principles, were suddenly faced with the question of how to deal with a basket of deplorables

in their ideological neighborhood. These are questions that France's bourgeois Gaullists have faced for decades—and come to grief on. After Merz approved his party's joining the FDP and AfD to vote for a property tax cut in Thuringia, moderates warned they would bolt the party if he made a habit of playing ball with the hard Right. Internally and externally, Merz has been constrained to assure the public he won't cooperate with the AfD, and to describe it as a national problem. The obvious danger for Merz is that he will lead Germany into the situation of France since the 1980s—where semi-permanent right-of-center majorities are led by semi-permanent left-of-center governments. Another danger is that, in certain Eastern states, keeping the AfD out of power would require the ideological embarrassment of going into coalition with the Left Party, descended in part from the official party of the East German Communist state.

By late October, in fact, the best hope for derailing the AfD appeared to be the stylish, charismatic Left Party member Sahra Wagenknecht, who joined the Communists just before the Wall fell. Wagenknecht was appalled that many in her Marxist entourage had abandoned the struggling masses and the working classes for such bourgeois frivolities as bike trails, speech codes, and gender fluidity. She also thought Germany's wide-open immigration policy was nuts. So when she announced she was leaving the Left to start her own group, she took half the party with her—and showed signs of broad appeal: 26% of voters in the West and 39% in the East would consider voting for her. Born in Thuringia (East Germany), she is also well connected in the Saarland (West). Her husband is Oskar Lafontaine, who quit his post as finance minister in the Social Democratic

government of Chancellor Gerhard Schröder in search of a more radical politics, and whose last book, *Ami, It's Time to Go* (2022), calls for a de-Americanization of Europe.

That impulse is growing in German intellectual life and spreading in Europe more broadly. In his recent book, *Le Labyrinthe des égarés* (roughly, "Lost in the Labyrinth"), the French novelist Amin Maalouf notes that Europeans have not really had to face up to their own *déclassement*, or downgrading, over the past century largely because power remained in the hands of the United States, which was, like the civilizations of Europe, firmly anchored in the West. Maalouf thinks that we are seeing the weakening of the West more generally.

Europe is not wholly to blame: America is not the partner it once was, either. Perhaps absolute power, of the kind it enjoyed after the Cold War, corrupted absolutely. Whatever the cause, the United States is now sharply, militantly divided over the question of whether it even wants to be a Western country. Two decades ago, at the outset of the Iraq War, large parts of the West—even in skeptical Germany—still believed in the exchange Maalouf describes: the U.S. could impart its vitality to Europe and Europe could impart a good deal of civilizational wisdom in return. Last July, on the eve of the Gaza war, the U.S. was flying the "trans flag" over its embassy in Jerusalem. So, in Germany as elsewhere, the bargain is breaking down. Partly because Europe is less impressed by the civilizational benefits of American vitality. Partly because the United States has ceased to believe that other countries have any civilizational wisdom to teach it.

*Christopher Caldwell is a contributing editor of the Claremont Review of Books.*

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